



The Web vs. Library Resources: a Research Rationale

Google, Bing, Yahoo. We all know the names. We all think we know what these search engines do. But what do they really do and how does it fit into academic study and research? And is what we find using Google or Bing or Yahoo adequate for academic research? If we can find everything we need online for free using a search engine, then why don't libraries just save their money and buy more computers and continue to provide free Internet access? The answer to this last question is in the question itself: researchers cannot find everything adequate to doing academic research for free online using a search engine. Therefore, libraries.



First of all, it is important to understand what search engines can and can't do. Search engines can index content that can be found openly on the internet. They can make that content searchable by keyword and link researchers directly to the content that is freely available on the open internet. They cannot, however, provide researchers with free access to material that is protected by copyright or which has access restrictions. Unfortunately for academic researchers, the vast majority of the material that will be useful and needed for academic projects will not be freely available over the open internet.

While Google Scholar comes closer than other search engines to producing search results that are academic in nature, much of the content that results from a Scholar search is not available for free. A researcher might be able to read a summary (abstract) of an article for free, but the full text of the article will likely be copyrighted and available only as a purchase, usually at considerable expense. Some research institutions and professional associations do provide material for free, but most research is reported in the form of articles published in academic journals, and these typically are not available over the open Internet for free.

This is where libraries come into play. Libraries specialize in purchasing materials that serve their clientele's needs. Academic libraries specialize in buying books, audiovisual materials, and journals that are of particular value to the academic communities that they serve. What this means to researchers is that they can usually rely on their libraries to provide access, for free, to the materials that they will need to help further their own research. No one library, however, will be able to afford access to all materials that are available. In those cases, most libraries participate in a resource sharing system known as interlibrary loan. In the case where a researcher identifies an article or book that is not available locally, it can be borrowed from or copied and sent by another library. This service is typically offered at no charge to the researcher.

While academic libraries might focus their collection efforts primarily on academic materials, they will also purchase materials of a more popular nature as well. Even though magazines and newspapers might not be the best sources to use for most academic research, they can be invaluable as basic information sources on a wide variety of topics. Even though many popular magazines offer access to their content directly online, they typically do so with limitations and the online versions of the magazines might differ from the print versions. As with nearly all publications, whether print or online,

magazines must maintain reliable revenue streams in order to continue publishing. Advertising alone usually doesn't provide adequate funding to keep a magazine in business, so revenue generated from subscriptions is necessary in order for the publication to continue operations. Again, libraries come into play by subscribing to individual publishers' collections or to databases that include a variety of publications. Once again, the researcher has access to these publications through the library at no charge.

Academic libraries are invaluable to researchers because of the access that they provide, for free, to journals and other materials that are typically not available over the open internet for free. While some search engines do help researchers to identify academic sources, academic libraries specialize in providing access to the materials that are most desirable for producing solidly researched, academic work.

Reading by Jim Alderman. Updated March 2014.